

Motherhood: An enslavement or choice?

Ramneet Kaur

Ph. D Student, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper discusses the question of women's reproductive choice, the choice of women to be mother or not. The paper argues when motherhood is forced upon women, when women are deprived of choice and control over their body, when women body is used as means for producing son, women's right to make reproductive choice is denied which entails the violation of their reproductive rights.

Keywords: motherhood, body, patriarchy, reproductive rights

Introduction

Reproduction plays a vital role in comprehending the significance of gender [1]. In patriarchal society it is the socially constructed gender roles which attribute who should be doing what and what is expected from whom and these prescribed roles becomes the basis of men and women identity. The fulfilling of one's expected gender role becomes the parameter of justifying one's being and reassuring one's acceptance. Consequently, men and women have their socially assigned and culturally expected roles which they are trained to perform and if one fails in any way or unable to live up to the ideal of expected role, is regarded as failure and unacceptable.

While men are expected and assumed to be the breadwinner of family, women are known and characterise by their bearing and nurturing role. By attaining motherhood, women validate her survival, achieve the ideal of complete women and essence of femininity. Women as child bearer are idealised in a way to make women believe that it is only through attaining motherhood they can prove their worth and value in society. Therefore, women by performing their expected gender role of bearer and nurturer, satisfy the societal norms of being women in a patriarchal society.

Forced Motherhood

Amrita Nandy argues, 'Indian mythology and religious texts are suffused with the imperative of motherhood, they establish the historical and socio-cultural legitimacy of motherhood and its conflation with womanhood [2]'. It is the impact of societal traditions and religious texts that role of child bearer has been made the foundation of women's life. It is the result of social and cultural mandates that women who cannot conceive are regarded as infertile and are called 'banzar zameen' the one who cannot produce anything and denied any identity as they have not been able to achieve and fulfil their expected role. Women with infertility are often unacceptable and bears the stigma of barren throughout their life. Women's value is dependent on fulfilling her procreative role and if women cannot produce she is regarded worthless because she has

been failed to achieve her purpose in life.

It is through procreation that women certify her existence and those who refuse to conceive becomes the victim of taunts and humiliation by society as well as by parents-in-law because they have declined to perform their socially assign gender role and have gone against the social and culturally established mandates. Women are suppressed by inculcating the belief that without children they are incomplete and the pressure of family and society are far more reaching and impacting than the wishes of women herself to become mother [3]. It is the result of societal pressure to conceive and bear children that women have 'become mothers without their choice and even greater number lost their lives bringing life into the world' [4]. Consequently, it is the wishes of parents-in-law which forces women to produce children even if they themselves does not desires it.

In this context, the choice of women to be mother or not gets neglected and most of the time not even considered. Women are forced to fulfil their role of motherhood and often coerced to such an extent that they are left with no options rather than accepting what they are asked to do. Motherhood is something which women should attain and there is no notion of choice, the women choice her desires are not even looked upon and under such circumstances women are denied control and right over their body. It is the norms of patriarchal society which regulates and rules the women's body.

After marriage it is expected that women will procreate because the 'cultural motherhood mandate forces her to establish her fertility' [5]. After marriage women not only goes through societal pressure of bearing the child but also compel by parents-in-law to produce child as soon as possible and mostly by child they meant son for the continuation of their lineage. Therefore, even the conception of motherhood is implanted in cultural biased preferences [6]. In patriarchal society it is women as mother of sons is accepted and often only by having son motherhood is completed. This reflects the gender biased mindset of society where motherhood is required but becoming mother of son is criteria of completing motherhood as by having son women completes her duty of

providing the heir the one who will carry forward the lineage. The son is required for carrying the name and lineage, performing death rituals for parents, providing security and financial support to the family [7]. Women bodies are used as means as medium or instruments for producing children and that too specifically son. So, it is not only motherhood is expected but becoming mother of son is desired and required. Women are socialised that on producing son their future is dependent and without son they have no value and no future. In patriarchal set up, women die in attempts of giving birth to son and even divorced or left for not producing son, consequently, when women are not regulating their body their reproductive capacity, then this results in a servitude [8]. In patriarchal system, women body is used for getting the desired sex children which leads to constant violation of their bodies. Adrienne Rich argues, 'the women body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected' [9]. In patriarchy women are used for producing male and therefore it reproduces the patriarchy. By making motherhood the criteria of completing womanhood patriarchy perpetuates the subordination of women as 'power is both primal word and primal relationship under patriarchy.' [10] It is the result of power inequality between men and women that body of women is regulated and controlled by men as means for obtaining their ends without considering women's choice. Though it is the women who produce the children but even despite this they cannot claim the child as her own because the seeds of men have far more acknowledge and influential role in patriarchal society than the women who gives birth. Women are used as fields the grounds which should any way produce, and its value lies and dependent on producing children meaning the son.

Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya argues, "Contemporary construction of motherhood ideology in India are evidence of both a glorification of an idealized maternal idea as well as the 'deficit' attributed to the maternal body, reflecting deep-seated patriarchal biases whose roots can be traced back in history."

[11] Though motherhood is so much glorified and posed as means of achieving power for women but in actual it only reflects the powerlessness of women because of the constant denial of choice and control over their body.

Therefore, reproductive exercises serve as an important medium of women suppression and domination and reflects, how women body is being used for serving the patriarchal interest [12]. It is the body of women which is used as means as source for serving the needs, interests of patriarchal society and perpetuating the male domination. The instrumental use of women body is the reflection of power inequality between men and women which results in denial of women the right to make choice regarding her body, to determine her fertility and choose or reject motherhood.

Reproductive Rights

Kallianes and Rubinfeld argues, 'women movement has a long history of fighting for women's right to self-determination and bodily integrity and supports their right to make decisions about their bodies, sexuality and child bearing.' [13] Reproductive rights are about enabling 'women to control her body and to enjoy all other rights including equality of men and women, right to free choice in matters of reproduction and sexuality and health care. Reproductive

rights are inalienable and inseparable from basic human rights [14]. Reproductive rights are human rights and grants women the status of free and equal individual who have the right to make choices about their body.

Jodi L. Jacobson asserts

Reproductive rights include the right of the individual to bodily integrity and security of persons, the right of couples and individuals to decide on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means necessary to do so; the right to attain highest standard of sexual and reproductive health; and the right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence [15].

Therefore, reproductive rights are not only about when, how many and with whom to have children but also to choose whether to have children or not. Reproductive rights enable women to choose whether to be mother or not and to be free from uncertain, unwanted, and forced motherhood. Reproductive rights grants women control and choice over their body. The need is to recognise women as human being who is entitled to rights over their body and denial of women right, choice and control over body is the violation of reproductive choice and right. It is essential to consider that women are also humans and persistence violation of their bodies against their will constitutes the infringement of their reproductive rights.

Further, motherhood in Indian context, have never been appeared as a choice which women can accept or reject rather 'women have little or no choice about motherhood. The interstice between motherhood as a choice and a compulsion is a fascinating space to explore [16].'

As Berer says

...is nothing natural about having reproductive rights. It is 'natural' for sexuality to be tied to reproduction...it is often 'natural' to be infertile. Reproductive rights is about separating sexuality from reproduction when we choose to do so...it is about finding means to overcome infertility, not just learning to live with it...it is about having an alternative and about saying yes or no to pregnancy when we choose to [17].

Control and choice are pivotal elements for realising women's reproductive rights as human rights [18]. Therefore, it is only by having the right to make choice of accepting or rejecting motherhood and controlling one's body, women can exercise their reproductive rights. What is required is to understand that the social, cultural, economic and political factors play a significant role in impacting the individual women choice. Sometimes it is about selecting among the given options, which may not involve the choice of women herself. Therefore, what is required is to bring social, economic changes and that too particularly in 'social and sexual relations of reproduction [19]. Further, reproductive rights can be used as medium or can prove to be great way for improving the position of women because the desired autonomy and entitlements for women cannot be realised without

guaranteeing reproductive rights ^[20]. By granting women control to over their body, the right of determining their fertility, one can hope to reduce the power inequality between men and women and therefore, bring improvement in the position of women.

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